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The Feast of First Mourning

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The Feast of First Mourning

by
Sumeia Williams

*Má, how is it that you flow through my veins
yet I possess the least of you?*

I was born twice before my thôi nôi,
a daughter born of flesh
before being rewritten on paper.

My soldier father left Việt Nam in 1970
but before he boarded the plane,
he buried his memory of Má
beside the runway.

With a duffel bag of souvenirs under one arm
and I, in the crook of another,
he left without ever asking her name.

Years later he would recall how I'd howled
and kicked from Sài Gòn to Honolulu.

"It was war," I'm told,
as if that should explain why

Má didn't exist
before my fourteenth birthday.

Unable to accept that my blood
flowed in another direction,

my American mother never spoke of Việt Nam,



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but the maternal compass
that had first mapped my veins
left markers that kept Sài Gòn
firmly imprinted in the corner of my eye.

Cung chúc tân xuân, Má. Happy New Year.

A mother in neither name nor memory,
it pains me to think that until now
she has eaten alone or not at all
on the Feast of the First Morning.

*Forgive me, Má, for letting over thirty years pass
before I lit incense for your ngày gió.*

The wisps of smoke hang suspended
before an alter still craving a face.
The empty picture frame holds nothing
but questions and laminated adoption documents

that offer no resolution for a severed bloodline
that's been cauterized with the words

“born of unknown parents.”

*Má, come feast with your American daughter
on what has become your death anniversary.*

I have nothing of substance
to entice her back among the living,
only my words as I rewrite her

into existence

knowing she was
and can *be* again
because I am here.

About the Author



Sumeia Williams was born in Saigon, Vietnam in 1970. Formerly, Le Thi Buu Tran, she was renamed after her adoption. She is currently living North Carolina as a mom to four kids and a part-time writer. Her poems and essays have appeared in places like [Azizah Magazine](#), [Nha Magazine](#), [The Iodine Poetry Journal](#) and will appear in an upcoming anthology, *Not Forgotten: Asian Americans Remember US Wars in Asia*.



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